The uncanny in Howard Hawks's The Big Sleep

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Dealing with *The Big Sleep* as a work fraught with uncanny representations now seems self-evident, after so many critics—whether in the field of literary or film studies—unsuccessfully strove to recapture the true development of the criminal plot unravelled by Marlowe: one piece still insists on being missing and points to the unsatisfactory closure of the text as well as the movie. It may be the mystery around Owen Taylor's death, a minor character (but are there really minor characters in the detective genre, before the final solution supposedly sets up the characters' roles for good?), or the main criminal protagonist in the movie, Eddie Mars, whose guilt is problematic in the plot. In other words, the disturbing, uncanny quality in the novel and the movie stems from this problematic closure and from the mystery on who did what precisely in the story—hence this quality derives from a debunking of the genre as self-contained and purely self-explanatory, an "ideal" of the text by which the text fails to abide. In the following discussion of the movie adaptation of Chandler's novel, I shall dwell on this problematic nature of the plot, which results from Hawks's deliberate designs, instead of trying to explain away the gaps in the logical development of the film narrative. These gaps are indeed the places where the director expresses his own viewpoint in the novel and develops a personal discourse on the uncanny quality within reality, a quality that duplicates—with a difference—the initial mystery that, in the novel, Geiger's death constitutes as the starting point for the investigation by Marlowe.

With respect to the specific quality of the uncanny in the movie, I shall distinguish three categories. First of all, an *epistemological or cognitive type of uncertainty* in the plot is instrumental in a perception of the movie diegesis as uncanny, from a strictly referential and logical perspective—that will be the basis of our criticism of the movie as adaptation. Beyond this, the movie also stages a whole materialization of the uncanny in formal terms, first through an *aesthetics* peculiar to it, then through *self-representation* as a way of questioning the cinematographic medium itself within the movie. We shall first, then, deal with the uncanny feeling inspired by the movie as a result from the many inconsistencies, from a logical viewpoint, in the plot, that tend to present it as unaccountable really, before tackling the topic as a deliberate design pointing to a new aesthetics enacted in the movie. We shall also integrate the psychoanalytical definition of the uncanny as a feeling resulting from the return of the repressed, but the theoretical orientation of this paper will not be psycho-critical in itself.

The entropy of adaptation

The prevailing approach to the movie *The Big Sleep* as an adaptation enhanced Hawks's reading of Chandler as informed by ideological censorship and teleological bowdlerizing. Thus, Ronald Librach[1] contends that, unlike the novel, the movie chooses to confirm Joe Brody's defence when the latter claims he is not guilty of Geiger's death and instead accuses Owen Taylor, the Sternwoods' chauffeur, whom he says he followed after and before the murder. As a matter of fact, if we watch the scene carefully, in the movie we do see *two* cars leaving Geiger's house before Marlowe finds the blackmailer dead, and one of those cars is the station wagon which we will see driven by Brody some time later (when Marlowe follows Brody as he moves out books from Geiger's shop). This mystery, at least, is apparently solved in the movie, which here appears as a simpler version of the same story in

[1] LIBRACH Ronald S., « Adaptation and Ontology: the Impulse towards Closure in Howard Hawks's version of *The Big Sleep*", *Literature Film Quarterly*, vol. 9, n° 3, July 1991, pp. 164-175.

novel form. Likewise, the enforcement of the Hays Code—a set of regulations having to do with censorship self-imposed by the movie producers from 1930 to the late 1960s—results in several changes from the plot of the novel to the scenario, especially with respect to the sexual content of the story: for instance, the topic of homosexuality is virtually non-existent in the movie compared to its importance in the novel.[2] The movie becomes as it were uncannily estranged from its literary model, owing to its subservience to the production context and to the spectators' expectations of a simpler, more "conclusive" plot than what we get in the novel. Cinema as estranged from literature—this is of course a simplistic vision which we shall reform immediately.

Hawks's movie, in fact, does not deliver a simpler, subdued version of the novel, but testifies to the *entropic* nature of the adaptation process that results in stressing, not erasing, the original uncanny quality of the novel's plot. If we remember for instance the way Marlowe reluctantly accepts Brody's embarrassed explanation about how he became possessed with Geiger's compromising photographs of Carmen, and about why he tried to blackmail Carmen Sternwood, we understand that through paralipsis the detective insists very much on the gaps and the lack of verisimilitude of Brody's tale: "We'll pass that […] That's a little weak but we'll pass that too". We are very far indeed from any smoothing of the rough edges off the narrative—which leaves us in doubt as to whether we may really believe Brody or not. This holds true for the novel too, for instance when Marlowe explains to Mona Mars how he got information from Jones after the latter learnt the detective was hired by General Sternwood: Marlowe says, in the novel and in the movie: ""How he found out is a long story". We have to think of Agnes Lozelle as the "linking element" between Marlowe and Jones, but Marlowe does not explain this and stresses instead the difficulty in getting a complete vision of the connections between the protagonists. Thus, the uncanny in the movie and the novel—resides not in the *erasure* of an entropic reading of the text, but in the deliberate exhibition, the exposure of this entropic reading. But how could this epistemological uncertainty resulting in gaps and an uncanny feeling within the plot relate to the place of the uncanny as a *concept* in the movie itself?

A first step to answer that question is to distinguish several types of inconsistencies—in the movie—from a logical perspective. A first type concerns the viewpoints from the various characters. When he first meets Vivian Sternwood, for instance, Marlowe refers[3] to Carmen's words on his size ("You're not very tall, are you?", as contrasted with what Carmen says to Marlowe in the novel, "Tall, aren't you?"[4]), and yet Vivian was *not* there when he met Carmen and when she told him that. The reference thus seems unaccountable, unless we understand Marlowe here suspects (and accuses) Vivian of spying on him (Marlowe's dialogue with Norris, the Sternwoods' butler, may confirm this reading, since Marlowe wonders then how Vivian knew he was visiting the General). Likewise, later on, in the restaurant scene added by Hawks in 1946, a scene in which both characters playfully sustain a horserace metaphor with sexual connotations, Marlowe tells Vivian that Regan, General Sternwood's missing son-in-law, left her for Mona Mars, gangster Eddie Mars's wife—and Vivian seems genuinely taken aback, whereas she had brought that information to Marlowe herself some time earlier, when she had come to his office to see him. Those two examples are typical illustrations of the cognitive puzzlement the movie deliberately plunges its

[2] On that point, see LUHR William, *Raymond Chandler and Film*, New York, Ungar, 1982, chapter 7.

[3] The reference appears in the following exchange of words, taken from the movie :

"Now you're a mess, aren't you?

— I'm not very tall either. Next time I'll come on stilts, wear a white tie and carry a tennis racket."

[4] CHANDLER Raymond, *The Big Sleep* (1939), Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 2005, p. 3.

spectators into, thus depicting an uncanny diegetic universe that derives from—but does not mimic— the overall blurring of roles in the novel. We shall see it is quite important that such conspicuous inconsistencies should be concerned with the issue of viewpoints.

Secondly, the movie develops an *entropic representational strategy* having to do with the adaptation process as a superimposition of a specific cinematographic reading over the literary medium. In other words, Hawks's interpretation is not a substitute for Chandler's text; it adds up to it and develops some lines of reading which would not appear so clearly in the text but for the movie itself. Such elements as revolve around Marlowe's (possible) guilt—impossible to integrate in any univocal reading of the novel—belong to that second category. Christopher Orr argued that Harry Jones's death could be read as a symptom of Marlowe's aggressive death-wish against his informer, in a desire to ward off the figure of the dominated male which Jones represents, in his relation to Agnes Lozelle.[5] Many other elements point indeed to Marlowe's possible guilt, even if this be only at a "fantasy" level. For example, we may think of Vivian's asking Marlowe when he brings Carmen back unconscious to the Sternwoods' residence after Geiger's death, "Did you do this?"; but also Marlowe's repeated answer to Eddie mars when he refuses to speak to the gangster in Geiger's house ("I already got a client") is a subtle, if not sustained, suggestion that Marlowe might indeed have worked for Mars under other circumstances. Both examples are also present in the novel. What Hawks adds lies in another scene, where after he brings Marlowe on the pier to examine Owen Taylor's corpse, inspector Bernie Ohls unaccountably tells the sleuth, with obvious reference to Taylor's death: "This doesn't look like the way you'd handle it." This departure from the novel materializes a new reading around Marlowe's potential guilt and once again adds up to the potential interpretations of the plot (in an entropic way) without the least concern for the compatibility of those interpretations.[6] Let us notice also that we shall never know what Marlowe was about to say when he was interrupted by this remark from Bernie Ohls, which is another way of drawing the spectator's attention to the lack of closure in the movie through the problematic viewpoint this movie develops on the novel's plot. Bernie Ohls's interruption of Marlowe's speech in this scene creates a mystery on what Marlowe was about to say, and the content of this interruption is itself problematic as we have just seen: the enigma is thus uncannily duplicated at the point when it was possibly going to be partially explained by Marlowe's interrupted sentence bearing on Taylor's death.

The uncanny and the movie's aesthetics

Our first development focused on the uncanny deriving from the illogicality or incompleteness in the management of the criminal plot by the detective and the narrative at large, pointing thus to Hawks's adaptation as "refusing" to be reduced to any teleological orientation supposedly peculiar to the detective genre. This refusal constitutes in itself a reading of Chandler's novel, opening up several leads that were not in the original text. Apart from the diegetic content studied so far, the movie adaptation arranges these heterogeneous elements from the story to build up a whole aesthetics, which will turn the uncanny into an

[5] ORR Christopher, "The Trouble with Harry: on the Hawks Version of *The Big Sleep*", *Wide Angle: A Film Quarterly of Theory, Criticism & Practice*, 1982, 5 (2): pp. 66-71. See p. 70: "What Jones represents is […] the male that allows himself to be dominated by a woman. Thus Canino's violence towards the castrated male and Marlowe's complicity in that violence originates in their fear of women as castrator."

[6] For instance, we may think of the hypothesis according to which Marlowe "wished" Owen Taylor dead (whether in an abstract or concrete manner—we do not know what he really could do to provoke that death) so as to revive a plot that will eventually bring him to fulfil his desire for Vivian.

essential issue in terms both of content and formal structure. We shall first tackle this aesthetics as a *narrative,* trying to locate the presence of the uncanny in that filmic narrative.

We already saw that Hawks deliberately handles the adaptation process as a means of providing a specific uncanny dimension to the plot—which was initially to some extent steeped in that kind of atmosphere. But the cinematographic adaptation in itself contributes to add up some measure of artificiality to Chandler's work, for instance when he chooses to transpose directly the somewhat literary speeches from the novel to the movie—when we hear General Sternwood about the orchid analogy linking his daughters to flowers: "They are nasty things. Their flesh is too much like the flesh of men. And their perfume has the rotten sweetness of a prostitute" (p. 8). This analogy reveals a lack of verisimilitude in the movie situation whereas the same sentence in the novel—not actually uttered—is perceived on a more abstract level, outside the actual utterance of a literary comparison that appears artificial in context. This is only one example—of limited validity *per se*—but pointing to a whole strategy of artificiality focused, among other elements, on the dialogues between characters. The first meeting between Marlowe and Vivian in the movie is thus characterized by a way of delivering her speech in which Vivian clearly contradicts the denotation of that speech: when she invites Marlowe to help himself to a drink she keeps the same aggressive, hurt tone as that with which she began the encounter, thus strangely opposing the literal content and the formal expression of her speech. Vivian utters her speech in the same breath, whether she tackles one topic (what the General has just said to Marlowe) or another (and a sensitive one), i.e. alcohol-drinking. The same strategy is repeated when Marlowe and Eddie Mars first meet—this emphasis on the artificiality of expression may be related, as we shall see, to the specificity of the cinematographic medium.

Another element in that aesthetics of artificiality has to do with the use of stereotypes which, again, tend to present the diegesis as unreal and to defamiliarise the story universe which the spectator faces. Thus, Marlowe is repeatedly presented as a "stock character", as the resourceful, wise guy, which fits very well his role as a detective. To embody this intelligence and vivacity in visual terms, Hawks attributes to Marlowe some kind of twitch that consists in touching his right ear whenever he has a clever idea, an insight or when he is faced with a difficult situation (for instance when he discovers Geiger's corpse or when he cross-examines Joe Brody after he has found out Vivian had gone to his place). An interesting instance of this device takes place when Marlowe sits in a restaurant and decides to call the Sternwoods' residence on the phone[7]—just when he has that idea (and consequently touches his ear) the waitress lights up the bulb just over his head, thus ironically stressing the stereotypical episode which points to a reflexive dimension in the movie. That undermines the filmic representation of the detective as ingenious and through an ironical slant which further associates the compulsory figures of the genre with the ironical distance taken from them. Likewise, if we think of the "gimmicks" that characterize Eddie mars and Lash Canino (the former toying with keys and the latter with coins) we are taken back to Hawks's 1932 movie *Scarface* that also staged the same kind of gimmicks for its main character; this becomes at the same time a sign of the stereotypical representation of criminals and a clue pointing to an

[7] Marlowe calls the Sternwoods' residence but Norris, the butler, tells him that the General in too ill to talk to him. Yet, Vivian tells him on the phone that Shawn Regan has just been found alive and safe in Mexico and that his investigation has thus come to an end. Marlowe will no more believe that lie than he believed Vivian's presentation of the blackmail by Brody, which was meant to get rid of the detective in fact and to enable her to deal with the blackmail, concerning the compromising pictures of Carmen, on her own. This scene is then at once, in its content, pointing to the tenacity and wit of the sleuth and from a formal viewpoint an ironical presentation of Marlowe's handling of the case.

interfilmic quotation within the same director's work. Lastly, we cannot but quote the scene where Marlowe quickly disguises himself as a "bookworm" before entering Geiger's shop, simply by tilting up the brim of his hat, and putting on dark glasses—this very basic disguise, which apparently functions correctly in the confrontation with Agnes Lozelle that ensues, shows that reality and identity are easily faked, since they rely mainly on preconceived ideas and visual stereotypes.

We are then faced with a fictional world in which characters are stereotyped and reality artificially corresponds to those stereotypes, which results in the depiction of a very strange and disquieting diegesis. This corresponds to Freud's definition of the uncanny as a feeling that mixes the recognition of a familiar element for the subject's psyche *and* the confrontation with otherness, a feeling that he accounts for by the return of what has been repressed (and hence is approached as alien to the subject) but which was before repression part and parcel of the psyche (hence the feeling of familiarity).[8] The types presented in Hawks's movie contribute to destabilise the spectator in that same way, by staging extremely recognizable and familiar roles in a strange, ironical light that questions our own habits of interpreting the movie. Thus, Annette Kuhn showed that in the movie Geiger's house can be analysed as a place that obsesses Marlowe (he returns there four times) connected to the mystery of femininity that is situated (as far as Carmen Sternwood is concerned) outside the symbolic order.[9] I would like to point to another polysemic image in the movie, that of Carmen as she bursts in on Brody to retrieve the compromising photographs taken at Geiger's house. Dressed as a Madonna, Carmen—whom Vivian watches anxiously as she makes eyes at Marlowe, a sign of morbid attention already experienced by Regan—subsumes the presence of fantasy as ambivalent and deadly, since she appears here at once as a child sucking her thumb, a saint, a murderer, a lunatic. This ironical and distanced rereading of all those roles is the hallmark of Hawks's staging of the scene, in which once again he puts forward those stereotypes to present them as uncanny and question their validity and function—in short, defamiliarising what ought to be recognised as a set landmark and make it appear strange. How does that distanced reading appear as a discourse on representation itself?

Reflexivity and unreality

We have seen how the movie builds up a whole aesthetics founded on the uncanny through several narrative and more largely representational strategies. Now I intend to show how Hawks's movie holds a discourse on its own aesthetics, on its own ways of telling the story. The first and most obvious of those reflexive discourses has to do with *verbal communication*. If we remember for instance the two scenes in which Eddie Mars's laughable thugs appear, i.e. when they rush to Geiger's house to prove Mars right when he claims he did not come alone, and when in Mars's casino at Las Olindas they tell Marlowe Vivian Sternwood wants to speak to him—we are struck by the fact that both scenes revolve around the impediment on speech, as both grotesque characters cannot decide who said what, and who is to speak or to listen. The same holds true for the famous phone hoax improvised by Marlowe and Vivian (a scene that was an add-up to the novel, in the script) in which the call to a police officer (named Reilly, like Doghouse Reilly, the name Marlowe humorously claims to be his when first meeting Carmen, which makes it a further intrafilmic reference)

[8] FREUD Sigmund, "The Uncanny," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. & trs. James Strachey, vol. XVII, London, Hogarth, 1953, pp. 219-252.
[9] KUHN, Annette, "*The Big Sleep*: A Disturbance in the Sphere of Sexuality", *Wide Angle* 4, n° 3, 1980: pp. 4-11.

again raises the question of who is talking to whom. This question keeps recurring, especially in the frequent arguments between Marlowe and Vivian, often consisting in a fight to have the last word, literally speaking. The failure of verbal communication is indeed a key feature in the movie, as shown also by the scene in which the two usherettes in Mars's casino cannot speak intelligibly to Marlowe for they speak at the same time, and thus have to wait for his "signal" to organize communication efficiently. Another sign of that failure appears in the scene added in 1946 by Hawks, in which Marlowe and Vivian have a witty conversation in a restaurant about horseracing and (figuratively) sex, a scene that ends up in a split between them. That scene is also a problem in narrative terms since just after that split Marlowe meets (by chance) Vivian singing at the Cypress Club in Las Olindas and she unaccountably joyfully greets him with a wave of her hand. We may consider this oddity, this rupture in the narrative continuity, to originate from the fact Hawks had to add that scene at a later period (that was a request from the producers), but it can also be read as a staging of the limits in verbal communication entailing a relative narrative inconsistency.

What is then the discourse held by the movie on its own representational strategy? Are images more reliable than words in it? Not if we remember the scene in which Mars stages a fake assault on Vivian after the latter won a large amount of money at his casino. This scene is a show put on for Marlowe to have him believe there is no friendly connection between Mars and Vivian, but Marlowe observes the assault through a car window in the parking lot of the casino, so that in the movie—where Hawks uses a point-of-view shot—the scene appears as "framed" by a window car reproducing a camera frame; this is a clear sign that cinema is also, or can also be, the medium of a fake, artificial representation. We could also quote the scene of the murder of Harry Jones by Canino, which was analysed by Marc Vernet as a scene which equates Marlowe's position as a witness of that death with the position of a dupe, since the detective wrongly believes Jones gave Agnes Lozelle's real address to Canino before dying, whereas in fact he sacrificed his life for her.[10] If the discourse held by the movie stresses the artificiality of the representational strategy even in terms of images, does this work keep a place for its spectator outside the feeling of unreality and manipulation that characterizes its protagonists? It seems the movie's discourse on this point is quite original and interesting in the sense that it locates the agency that is liable to organize that unreality of the diegesis *off-screen*—that is, potentially, in the spectator. For instance, in the scene where Carmen comes back to Geiger's place and is surprised by Marlowe who asks her questions about Brody, we see her answering "yes" to Marlowe's question (i.e. did Brody kill Geiger?) with a smile on her face indicating that she thus wishes to take her revenge on Brody her former lover, a smile which potentially Marlowe who is off-screen then does not see. Marlowe's attitude in this scene where he drives Carmen into a corner no doubt reveals that Carmen's answer is not reliable, and he makes fun in the following sequence of the way she naively tries to fool him. Yet, this ambiguous management of the off-screen dimension reveals the necessity of the spectator's participation (Marlowe being here the "spectator" of Carmen's intended manipulation of him) for the movie to make sense. Through representing an openly deceptive device, the cinematographic medium stresses the all-important presence of another vision, which is always in the making through the spectator, whether he is intradiegetic (Marlowe) or extradiegetic (you and me). Inscribing the presence of another vision off-screen (or in the shot-reverse shot technique, which amounts to the same phenomenon) requests the spectator to invest the movie with a distanced reading of images (for instance as far as the stereotypes already described are concerned) and to consider the uncanny in that work as a discourse that is in fact addressed to him or to her.

[10] « Le Grand sommeil est un bloc magique », *Avant-scène cinéma*, n° 329-330 : juin 1984.